

## [Better I'm Here]

Roaldus Richmond BETTER I'M HERE

The lighted windows were pyramided with fruits and vegetables. The interior of the store was a jumble of glass cases backed by crowded shelves that rose tier on tier to the ceiling. A short soda-fountain occupied one corner. In the ceiling an electric fan stirred the heat of the summer night. The place seemed overstocked with everything from plug chewing tobacco to penny candies. A bunch of bananas hung golden in the lights, that shimmered through the ale and wine bottles ranked on the shelves behind. Prominently located was a pinball game.

Luigi was short and plump in his clean white apron, with clean-shaven red cheeks and strong white teeth gripping a thin black stogie. His short-cut brush of dark hair was graying now, but the twinkling black eyes and the smiling pink face were young.

The store was empty of customers after Luigi sold a pack of cigarettes, an ice cream cone, two bottles of ale, a bottle of milk, a loaf of bread, and two chocolate bars. Luigi was ready and willing to talk.

"Goddam they all come at once like-a that," he said. "Nobody else come for two hours. Mightsa well close her up. But if you close-a what you do? Nothing. So I keepa open. 2 Maybe I don't make-a no money. Maybe I make-a a little." He shrugged. "Mightsa well be here as upstairs listen the radio."

"Yes, you bet," he went on. "I got about all you wanta here. The besta fruit, the besta vegetable, all kinda grocery, tobacco, candy, soda, beer. Everything I guess but the meat. This neighborhood pretty gooda business. Mosta all work in the sheds, cut-a the stone. Make-a pretty good money when they work. Mosta all pay cash then. Thatsa how I like him to do. But when he don't work, he can't pay. I carry him on the books then. I got to, ain't

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I? And mosta time I get-a my money. Some-a-time I lose, but not much. These folks pay pretty damn good.

“Oh, I gotta plenty owe me yet. Everybody owe everybody today. Itsa gotta be like that, not enough-a money. I get-a [hook?] plenty some-a-times. Like-a last week when old Perroni die. His family, they gotta nothing left, after they bury him. He no helpa that, they no helpa, me no helpa neither. I helpa them, sure. But you take-a some sonofabitch like this Costa. He's a goddam crook. Last month he scram, move-a right out, take-a the family, the furniture, everything. Never [saya?] word to me. After I carry him and his family all through the winter, all winter long, after he gotta laid off. Not a goddam cent all winter. Then he beates out. I tell you, I knowa he go, he no go very damn far! I stopa him, have-a to kill the sonofabitch. I tella you true.

“But most folksa round here, they pay pretty good. [Mosta?] Italian like-a me. Some-a Spanish too. Mosta all try, do the best they can, nice-a people. 3 “From Genoa I come. Was over there in the War before. Italy, you gotta go, whether you like-a or not. You gotta go in the army, you gotta go fight. Jesu' Christa, I no wanta go no more I wanta chop off the leg! But justa same I go. How bad it was I can't tella. Had enough by God so I see fellas hurt themselves so they go back. Smasha the feet with the rocks. Shoota the arms, the legs. Anything so notsa go the Front. Another fella and me one time, tella you what we did. We was on leave in Milano. We had enougha the goddam War. We thinka ways so we don't go back to fight. We pick up the dirtiest worst looking whore we finda Milano. We try-a got a dose, see? We both take-a crack. We take-a the fronta church in the dark. By Jesu' Christa, you know what happen? That other fella, he got it. I don't get-a nothing! He go-a the hospital. I go-a the trench.

“All through the War with a machine-gun crew. Once I was wounded. In the leg, you see-a the limp. Hurtea like hell in the wet weather. All I got-a the War. . . My brother Angelo, he live-a here then. He spenda week Camp Devens, I guess. Now you thinka he won the

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whole war. Jesu' Christa! What he know about it? All time talksa American Legion. Jesu' Christa.

“Only time now I wanta the gun, when I see some-a these big shots ride by. New car every year, can't paya bill. Old Cutting, he own a bank, he can't paya me twenty dollar. Old Hutch'; he own a store, he can't paya me what he owe. When they ride-a by, big car, heads a up, sonofabitch! If I hadsa machine gun then, I give-a him it. 4 “I come here [after?] the War. Glad I come, too. I'ma fed up with Italy, and itsa worse now. My brother Angelo; he say: “I get you nice-a job in the stonished.' I say to him: 'Like-a hell you will!' After while I got some money offa Angelo. Itsa all,paid now. I open this store and I been here ever since. Abouta twenty year. I don't make-a so mucha Angelo, but I do pretty damn good justa same.

“I senda my sister' boy to school. He live-a with me after my sister die. He wanta be lawyer. I say go 'head, lawyer make-a the money, justa same any crook. Now he study Notre Dame. Anyway he go there, I don't know how mucha he study. Some-a-time I wonder. He's a pretty lazy fella. He likesa good time, likesa raise hell, likesa drink, chase-a the girl. Always make-a the trouble. Last summer fella come-a to me and say: 'Louie, that boy yours, he harma my girl. Last night he got fresh, rip-a-the skirt, rip-a-the stocking, thrown the bush!' I tella him: 'Jesu' Christa, what you want me do? Your daughter, she don't know better than go with him, itsa her own fault.' He's a good boy, but I don't know. He givesa me plenty headache, plenty trouble.

“Itsa lonesome some-a-time now though, mince the boy go away. I missa him sure. Some-a-time I wish I marry — almost. But never not quite. If I wanta woman I get-a. I know one, she come. She notsa young, me not neither. If itsa young ones I wanta, go to Montreal. Get plenty up there, all kinda. I go three-four timesa year maybe. Good buncha young fella round here. They like-a me pretty good, they take-a me with them. Not justa Montreal. We go to ball games and fights, 5 all like-a that. They know I spend plenty, buy plenty whisky, plenty beer. Lotsa nights they hang round in here, justa smoke and talk and tella story.

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After I close up we go upstairs, drinka wine or beer, listen the music. They always knowa drink at Louie's. But I think they like-a me justa same I don't spend or givea so much.

"About this town I don't know. Itsa good enough, good as any, I guess. I'm a citizen, sure, I give-a vote every year. I vote for Roosevelt. He's a one president we got fighta the big business. I try be a good citizen, too, but some-a-time I feel like-a goddam Communist. I feel like go graba the bomb, blowa to hell everything, laugh while-a go.

"One thing I know, we gotta better here than in the Old Country. So when I got so goddam mad I thinka like that. Better I'm here than there.

"About granite I can't tella much. I see-a the sheds, I see-a the quarries, I see-a the men come home cover with dust, like they rolla in it. Mosta stonecutter I like fine, good fella. . . But I tella you, me, makesa me goddam glad I no worka there."